Research Report

Social Media in the Media:
How Australian Media Perceive Social Media as Political Tools

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The Impact of Social Media on Agenda-Setting in Election Campaigns: Cross-Media and Cross-National Comparisons

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About the CCI

The ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (CCI) was established in 2005 to focus research and development on the contribution the creative industries and their contributing disciplines make to a more dynamic and inclusive innovation system and society.

With core support from the Australian Research Council from 2005-13, it is acknowledged as a global leader in this emerging field. It is a broadly-based, cross-disciplinary, internationally-focussed centre embracing both fundamental theoretical, and highly applied, research in media, cultural and communication studies, law, education, economics and business and information technology, addressing key problems and opportunities arising for Australia, the Asian region, and more broadly in the world, from innovation in and through the creative economy.

The CCI is headquartered at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia, and involves researchers from universities throughout Australia. It engages in research partnerships with leading research institutes throughout the world.

About *The Impact of Social Media on Agenda-Setting in Election Campaigns: Cross-Media and Cross-National Comparisons*

The Impact of Social Media on Agenda-Setting in Election Campaigns is a joint project conducted by researchers at the University of Oslo, the University of Bergen, Uppsala University, California State University Long Beach and Queensland University of Technology. The project seeks to establish new and unique knowledge on the interaction and inter-media agenda-setting between social media and mainstream media in different cultural and political settings. Through comparative case studies of cross-media agenda-setting during election campaigns in the four countries in which participating research institutions are based – Australia, Norway, Sweden, and the USA – the project analyses similarities and difference between these selected nations. The findings of the project provide empirical insights into the development of hybrid public spheres, and contribute to refining and revising theories on political communication in cross-national environments.

Contents

Executive Summary

Social media are becoming increasingly integrated into political practices around the world. Politicians, citizens and journalists employ new media tools to support and supplement their political goals. This report examines the way in which social media are portrayed as political tools in Australian mainstream media in order to establish what the relations are between social media and mainstream media in political news reporting. Through the close content-analysis of 93 articles sampled from the years 2008, 2010 and 2012, we provide a longitudinal insight into how the perception by Australian journalists and news media organisations of social media as political tools has changed over time. As the mainstream media remain crucial in framing the public understanding of new technologies and practices, this enhances our understanding of the positioning of social media tools for political communication.

Key Findings

- Social media are increasingly seen as valid political communication tools for politicians, citizens and journalists.
- Social media and traditional media are seen as increasingly integrated with each other as tools for political news reporting.

Changes over Time

Significant changes in how social media were reported on from 2008 to 2012 suggest gradual changes in how they are being perceived. Key overall changes in reporting include:

- An overall increase in reporting on the use of social media in Australian politics: our study shows a three-fold increase in the number of articles about social media as political tools from 2008 to 2010, a five-fold increase from 2008 to 2012.
- An increasing presumption in media reporting that readers know what social media are and how they are used: while articles in 2008 define and describe social media, by 2012 they refer to social media without further explanation.
- A significant decrease in articles that compared social media to traditional media from 2008 to 2012, in favour of portrayals that see social and traditional media as integrated with one another: while there is no significant shift in how social media are conceptualised in relation to traditional media (mostly as useful additional media), there is a growing sense that social media have become integrated into the everyday practices and processes of political communication, reporting, and engagement.

Taken together, these changes show that uses of social media as additional tools in political life have become normalised and routine: **social media no longer are the story, but have become key tools for telling the story**.

Further, a number of significant trends in reporting about the political uses social media can be observed for different political actors:

User Groups

- The three main user groups that appeared in our sample of articles were politicians, citizens, and journalists. The political uses of social media were conceptualised differently in relation to these groups.
- Politicians' uses of social media were the most reported on across the years, followed closely by citizens. Journalists' uses of social media for political news reporting were considered only rarely.

Politicians

- In 2008, politicians used social media to indicate that they were moving with the times and understood societal changes. By 2010 and 2012, this reasoning no longer appeared in reports on how and why politicians used social media, further reinforcing the normalisation and integration of social media into the political sphere over time.
- A small number of articles reflected on the attitudes of politicians towards social media as political tools; over time, more negative attitudes in 2008 (perceiving social media as useless or even detrimental for politics) transformed towards into positive attitudes in 2010 and 2012. Politicians were increasingly more inclined to see the benefits of using social media as political tools.
- Reports of politicians using social media 'incorrectly' decreased over the years. This indicates that over time, politicians have become better at using these tools, as well as that there is less anxiety about how to use them properly.
- Questions over the use of social media tools by politicians and government officials to cut out traditional media as mediators between them and the public only emerged in news reporting in 2012. Hence, our analysis reveals not only how social media use is reported on in traditional media, but also indicates more general shifts and trends in their application as political tools over time.

Citizens

- Members of the public are predominantly portrayed as using social media to campaign, fight for their rights, and support particular causes. This indicates that citizens employ social media as tools for demanding and achieving attention and change to the public policy issues that affect them.
- Other perceived reasons for citizens' use of social media as political tools include: to support, criticise, or gossip about politicians.

Journalists

- The use of social media as political tools by journalists is much less reported than their use by the other two groups, but there is an overall increase in articles reporting on the use of social media by journalists from 2008 to 2012.
- There is a shift across the years in how social media are portrayed as tools for political journalism; in 2008, articles demonstrate the potential for social media as tools for political news reporting, yet indicate that this potential is not being realised. By 2010, articles

reveal that journalists have begun to use social media tools, if not yet in the most effective fashion. Articles from 2012 convey more successful engagement by journalists with social media tools.

- Journalists increasingly use social media as a source for, or as supporting evidence in, their reporting – for example by citing politicians' social media statements and conversations. A significant number of articles (between 20 and 35 per cent during the study period) cited from politicians' social media accounts.

Further Outlook

The changing relationship between social and traditional news media has significant implications for political agenda-setting. The study described in this report tests a methodology for sampling and analysing newspaper articles that report on the use of social media as political tools. Our findings suggest that social media are increasingly prominent in political news reporting. We also provide preliminary insights into how social media are portrayed in the traditional media in Australia, and on what this can tell us about the use of these tools for political purposes more generally. The study provides a useful framework for a broader-based analysis of reports about social media in any given political context. Our methodology is easily replicable and can be applied across different countries. At the CCI, we intend to repeat this study on a larger scale in the aftermath of the 2013 federal election in Australia; we will also explore the potential for cross-national comparisons across the nations represented by other researchers in our project and beyond.

In order to attain a more comprehensive overview of news reporting on social media as political tools during the 2013 federal election campaign in Australia, we endeavour to carry out a comprehensive analysis of articles on social media and Australian politics from major national newspapers from 2013 and from 2010, the year of the previous federal election. Comparative analysis of how social media are reported on in relation to Australian politics in these two election years will generate deeper insights into inter-media agenda-setting practices in modern Australian politics.

Further, the journalistic perceptions of social media uses by political actors in Australia can also be tested against observable reality by comparing them with the large-scale data on the day-to-day social media activities (on Twitter) of Australian politicians and other societal actors, which we are also gathering for the 2013 Australian election period. A study of Australian politicians' Twitter activities, and their resonance in the wider user community, during the 2013 campaign will provide first-hand insights which we intend to compare with how such activities were perceived and covered in mainstream media reporting.

Our longitudinal, comparative, quantitative analysis of how social media are portrayed as political tools in traditional media provides an important means of developing a better understanding of the role of social media in the Australian political landscape. Such a comprehensive conceptualisation will make it possible to conceive of the role of social media in political agenda-setting in national and international contexts, and to distinguish myth from reality.

Introduction

The mediated nature of modern politics (Franklin, 2004; McNair, 2003; Negrine, 1996; Thompson, 1995) and the political agenda-setting function of the media have long been acknowledged in academic scholarship (see e.g. Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller, 1980; Graber, 1997; McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Walgrave and van Aelst, 2006). Recently, online media have contributed a new 'communicative ingredient' (Cottle, 2008) to the mediated political public sphere. Online social media are interlinked with traditional media outlets. Together they constitute what has been described as a 'patchwork quilt' of communication flows (Cottle, 2008; McNair, 2006): a 'hybrid media ecology' (Jenkins 2006; Benkler 2006).

In light of this cross-media environment, an important yet still underdeveloped component of media scholarship is the conceptualisation of the dynamics between social media and traditional media. This study develops a framework for establishing a comprehensive analysis of how social media are portrayed in traditional media outlets in relation to public political debate in Australia, in order to account for the impact of inter-media agenda-setting in politics today. Based on a method developed by Wallsten (2008) to analyse the relationship between mainstream media and political blogs, we conducted a close content analysis of 93 Australian newspaper articles from the years 2008, 2010 and 2012 which refer to social media and politics. This analysis sought to test our methodology and gain some preliminary insights into the ways in which social media are portrayed in the traditional media in Australia, and what this can tell us about the use of these tools for political purposes. We intend to repeat this study on a larger scale in light of the 2013 federal election in Australia. We also anticipate our study to provide a model that other researchers, in this project and beyond, can adopt to examine the inter-relation of social and mainstream media in the political arena in their countries. This will then allow for comparative analysis across all countries involved in this project.

Literature Review

Early studies of the use of the internet for political communication acknowledged that online tools were being employed for political purposes (see e.g. Bentivegna, 2002; Hill and Hughes, 1998; the Markle Foundation, 1997). Since these early applications, online technologies and their role and prominence in peoples' lives have changed and expanded. More recent studies on the use of social media to engage with political issues (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Christensen, 2011; Harlow & Harp, 2012; Larsson & Moe, 2011; Lotan *et al.*, 2011; Macnamara, 2008; Small, 2011; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012) account for developments in online engagement, including the steady increase of user-generated content, the expanding landscape of online tools (most recently, mobile apps) at the users' disposal, and the evolution of a generation of 'digital natives', more and more familiar with, and literate in using, new media for all purposes of their day to day lives (at least in the Western, developed world).

It is becoming clear that online tools play a significant role in shaping public opinion and setting political agendas (Harfoush 2009; Woolley et al. 2010; Wallsten 2007; Westling, 2007). Politicians, citizens and journalists increasingly

adopt new social media like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to support their political purposes, be it to engage with other stakeholders in the political public sphere, campaign, disseminate or retrieve information, or contribute to rational-critical debate. While the bearing this new media engagement has on the public sphere is still much debated in current academic scholarship (see e.g. Habermas, 2006; McChesny, 1996, 2006; de Sola Pool, 1984; Markle Foundation, 1997), what is clear is that digital technologies are being used as tools for political engagement.

It is important to build a more nuanced understanding of the way in which new media's role in public debate and political discussion is perceived and portrayed by and through more established publishing forums in the traditional media, in order to identify the relation between the two and explore how this interrelation shapes political agenda-setting. Analysing how social media are conceptualised in traditional media outlets in relation to Australian politics can provide insights into how those involved in political debate engage with one another, what expectations they hold of each other, and how they employ online tools to support their efforts of setting political agendas, demanding and achieving change, and participating in the public sphere(s).

Methodology

Wallsten (2007) established a methodology for analysing the role of political blogs in political agenda-setting to explore the relationship between blogs and mainstream media. By selecting particular American political blogs, identifying key issues discussed on these blogs, and using online database LexisNexis to search *The New York Times* for keywords, Wallsten compared political agenda-setting on blogs and in an established American print publication. He found that the 'relationship between mainstream media and political blogs is a high-speed, two-way street' (Wallsten, 2007, p. 567).

This study has adapted Wallsten's methodology to understand how social media are conceptualised in the mainstream media. We utilised elements of Wallsten's approach, yet enhanced it by looking at articles in more than one publication, across a greater time-span, and without limiting our search to particular political issues and debates. Our aim was to develop a comparative, longitudinal study of the general sentiment towards social media as political tools in traditional media.

We used the EBSCOhost server to search the Australia/New Zealand Reference Centre database. We used the Boolean search phrase (Twitter OR Facebook OR 'Social Media') AND (polit*) to retrieve articles that discussed social media and politics in the targetted timeframes. In order to limit this further to Australian politics and Australian media, we searched only domestic papers. In a second step we selected articles only from the following Australian publications:

Sydney Morning Herald
The Australian
Daily Telegraph
Sunday Telegraph

The Age (Melbourne)
Sunday Age (Melbourne)
Canberra Times
Herald Sun (Sydney and Melbourne)
Sunday Herald Sun (Sydney and Melbourne)
Courier Mail (Brisbane)
Sun-Herald (Sydney)

We also included the AAP Australian National Newswire (a key national news agency in Australia) and ABC Premium News (the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's online news service) in the list of publications. Hence, rather than using online content to derive keywords to drive a search in one mainstream newspaper, we developed Wallsten's (2007) approach to search more generally for the combination of social media and politics in a wider range of publications.

We performed separate searches for the years 2008, 2010 and 2012. In order to generate a manageable dataset, we decided to limit our analysis to articles that were published in the first 7 days of each month during the three years.

For 2008, we gathered a total of 29 articles, for 2010, we collected 60 articles, and for 2012, 114 articles. Through manual content analysis we identified some irrelevant articles that had to be eliminated. Some reasons for eliminating articles included:

- Articles mentioned social media and politics but not Australian politics in particular.
- Articles mentioned the social media contact details of the author or publication but the article itself was not about social media (but about politics).
- The AAP Australian National Newswire provides overviews of the week's highlights as well as outlines of articles to come in the following week. Often separate stories would mention either social media or politics but not both in the same headline. Even where they did, these short one- to two-sentence summaries were not regarded as representative enough to be included in the analysis.
- Letters/opinions from readers were eliminated as we sought to analyse how the media report on the use of social media as political tools, not how everyday citizens perceive them (see Wallsten, 2007).
- Where the search generated exact duplicates of articles from the *same* publication, duplicates were eliminated. If the same article was published in *different* papers, it was included in the sample for analysis.
- Using the word stem 'polit*' to find all derivations of the word 'politics' also produced matches for words like 'polite', which were not always relevant to the study. Such false positives were excluded.

After eliminating such irrelevant articles, **10 relevant articles from 2008, 35 relevant articles from 2010, and 48 relevant articles from 2012** remained. The entire sample consisted of **93 articles.** The distribution of articles across years has been visualised in Fig. 1.

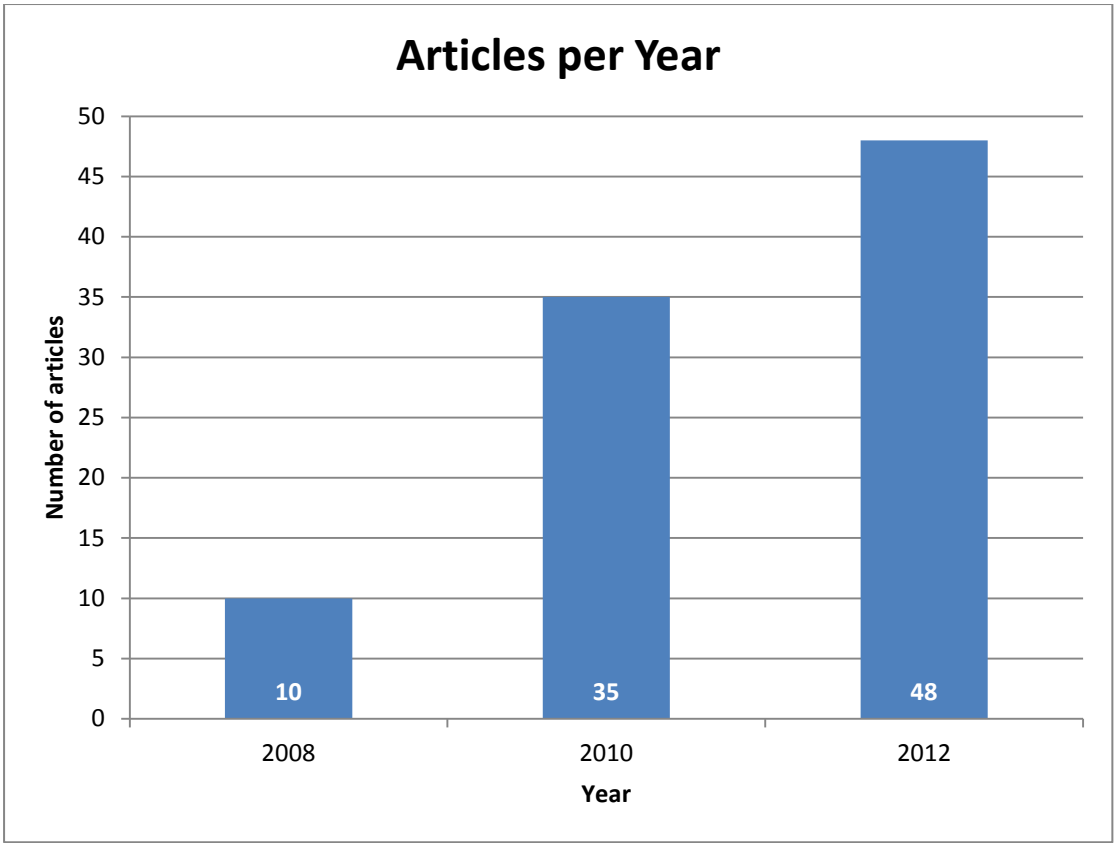

Figure 1: Distribution of sampled articles across years

The sampled articles were analysed via in-depth manual content analysis. Content analysis is a long established methodology for analysing communication patterns and discourses in media (see McNamara, 2005 for a detailed history of the use of content analysis in media research). We generated a comprehensive set of categories, containing different themes and subthemes to analyse and compare the sample of articles (see below for details). We performed a close reading of the content of each article and recorded the themes each article mentioned on separate spreadsheets for each year. This provided a useful visual representation of the data that allowed us to compare and contrast the way in which social media are portrayed in traditional media outlets as political tools over time.

Newspapers/Publications

Table 1 shows the spread of articles across the different publications included in the study. Weekday and Sunday editions of the same papers were combined as one category in the table. The AAP Australian National Newswire, *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* published the most articles on social media as political tools.

While there was limited variation in the proportionate amount that each paper reported on social media and Australian politics from year to year, it is interesting to note that in 2008 and 2010 *The Canberra Times* did not publish any articles (in the first week of each month) on social media, yet in 2012 there were 7 articles on the topic in the publication.

Publication	2008	2010	2012	Total
AAP Australian National Newswire	1	11	16	**28**
The Age and *The Sunday Age* (Melbourne)	2	11	12	**25**
The Sydney Morning Herald	2	6	7	**15**
The Canberra Times	-	-	7	**7**
The Australian	1	3	1	**5**
The Sun-Herald (Sydney)	-	2	3	**5**
The Herald Sun and *The Sunday Herald Sun* (Sydney and Melbourne)	1	1	2	**4**
The Daily Telegraph and *The Sunday Telegraph*	2	1	-	**3**
The Courier Mail (Brisbane)	1	-	-	**1**
ABC Premium News	-	-	-	**-**

Table 1: Overview of articles from publications across years

Dates

We chose to analyse and compare articles from the years 2008, 2010 and 2012 in order to represent a logical chronological succession and to allow for longitudinal comparison. 2012 was the most recent complete year for which we could source articles. We decided to go back in two-year steps to 2008 to provide a representative yet still manageable longitudinal overview. This also enabled us to include 2010, the year of the last Australian federal election, an event which has been described as the 'Twitter election' by some commentators (but see Burgess & Bruns, 2012, for a critical view of that claim). This provides a useful case study for exploring how a major political event may shift traditional media perspectives on the use of social media in politics. We chose to include 2008 in our comparative analysis because the use of social media tools in Australia was still in its comparative infancy at that point.

Analysis

Categories, Subthemes and Subgroups

In order to analyse our sample of articles, we generated nineteen main categories that reflected the most prominent themes. We grouped these categories into 7 subgroups as portrayed in Tables 2-8. Some categories were further specified through the use of subthemes. These are indicated by arrows in the tabular representation below. The 7 categories which we used to group categories and subthemes: Social media as political tools (Table 2), Comparison between social media and traditional media (Table 3), Nature of political discussion online (Table 4), Comparison of Australian use of social media to other countries (Table 5), Reasons and uses of social media in politics by politicians (Table 6), Reasons and uses of social media in politics by citizens (Table 7), User groups (Table 8) and Attitudes of user groups to social media (Table 9). For a first broad overview the total number of articles that referred to the particular themes and sub-themes each year has been recorded in the tables below. Most articles referred to several themes. It needs to be remembered that there was an uneven distribution of articles across years; we analysed 10 articles from 2008, 35 from 2010 and 48 from 2012 (see Fig. 1 above).

Themes	Mentions		
Subgroup: Social media as political tools	**2008**	**2010**	**2012**
Social media as changing politics	1	3	1
→ Not all that new / power is overstated	1	2	-
Social media as new battlegrounds in election	1	2	1
Digital campaigning	-	1	6
Social media as political tools	2	3	9
Social media monitoring	-	-	2

Table 2: Social media as political tools

Themes	Mentions		
Subgroup: Comparison between social media and traditional media	**2008**	**2010**	**2012**
Overall comparisons	4	3	6
→ interrelation	2	2	3
→ additional medium, not replacement	3	1	3
→ have to use social media right	1	1	1
→ social media = more useful tool	1	-	-
→ traditional media = more useful/ more used tool	-	1	-

Table 3: Social media vs. traditional media

Themes	Mentions		
Subgroup: Nature of political discussion online	**2008**	**2010**	**2012**
Political discussion online	1	3	2
→ social media trivialises political discussion	-	3	1
→ aggressive, bullying	-	-	1
→ more professional discussion	1	-	-

Table 4: Nature of political discussion online

Themes *Subgroup: Comparison to other countries*	Mentions 2008	2010	2012
Comparison to US election 2008 / Obama 2008	2	1	2
Comparison to Britain	1	-	-

Table 5: Comparison of Australian use of social media to other countries

Themes *Subgroup: How/why/for what are social media used in politics by politicians?*	Mentions 2008	2010	2012
Why use social media in politics?	7	15	36
→ cut out traditional media as mediators between politicians and public	-	-	2
→ gather support	1	2	4
→ push policies	1	1	3
→ create personable image	1	4	3
→ organise campaign	1	-	-
→ attack opponents	-	2	7
→ create personal connections with voters	1	1	4
→ provide real-time information (immediacy)	1	5	6
→ show politicians understand society	2	1	-
→ interact/online debate	2	1	7
→ cost-effective communication tool	-	1	-
→ get voters to share/campaign with their own networks: spread	-	1	-
→ reach voters (particularly certain groups, e.g. younger generation, women, seniors)	1	3	3
→ surveillance of citizens by government	1	-	2
How are social media used in politics?	2	1	3
→ one-way communication	1	1	3
Policies around social media/lawmaking	1	3	2

Table 6: Reasons and uses of social media in politics by politicians

Themes *Subgroup: How/why/for what are social media used in politics by citizens?*	Mentions 2008	2010	2012
Why social media in politics?	3	5	16
→ support politicians	-	-	8
→ criticise politicians	2	3	3
→ gossip about private lives of politicians	-	1	2
→ citizen campaigning	2	3	8

Table 7: Reasons and uses of social media in politics by citizens

Themes *Subgroup: User groups*	Mentions 2008	 2010	 2012
Use of social media by politicians	6	24	21
→ politicians using them wrong	4	8	2
Use of social media by public for political engagement	5	12	20
→ who uses	1	2	2
Use of social media by media/journalists	1	2	3
→ citations of politician's social media use	2	12	12

Table 8: User groups

Themes *Subgroup: Attitudes of user groups to social media*	Mentions 2008	 2010	 2012
Attitudes of politicians to social media	1	3	5
Attitudes of traditional media/journalists to social media	1	-	-
Attitudes of public to social media as political tools	-	-	-

Table 9: Attitudes of user groups to social media

The tabular representation of how commonly themes were reported on in each year provides a brief overview of the changes in the prevalence of themes across years. It also shows which themes were only discussed in earlier or later years. Identifying subgroups provides an insight into the different aspects of the overall conceptualisation of social media in politics. The subgroups named above reflect that some articles examine how social media themselves act as tools for political campaigning, engagement, and/or reporting. Accordingly, different articles report on different social media user groups and on their reasons for and ways of using them as political tools (see details below). Other articles compare social media and traditional media and deliberate which are more useful and/or more used for political engagement. Again, these articles report on different user groups for whom social media may or may not be useful. Some articles also draw comparisons between the use of social media in Australia and in other countries, most commonly focussing on the U.S. and occasionally on Britain. A further aspect explored in some articles are the attitudes of different user groups (politicians, the general public, journalists, academics) to the usefulness of social media as political tools, as well as the nature and quality of political discussion online – is it more aggressive than offline debates? Does it trivialise political themes? Are things taken out of context and thus misrepresented?

In the subgroup *How/Why/For what are social media used in politics by politicians?* (Table 6), the categories 'surveillance of citizens by government' and 'policies around social media use/lawmaking' do not directly reflect how social media are used as political tools, however they portray an aspect of social media and politics that deals with concerns around how the use of these tools is being governed. This thematisation of social media use by governments to (attempt to) control the population's conduct (through direct use of social media by government agencies, but also more generally through surveying users' actions) is indicative of the potential implications that the integration of these tools into everyday life has for politics, law-making and governance.

Identifying representative categories and subcategories, grouping them together logically according to particular themes, and systematically recording which articles discuss which themes in a visually descriptive format (spreadsheet) is an effective way of analysing how social media are represented as political tools in traditional media outlets. This methodology can easily be replicated on a grander scale in the future. Categories may need to be condensed, eliminated or added depending on the data generated.

Findings

Our analysis reveals significant changes to how social media were reported on over the 2008-12 period. This suggests a growing adoption and expanding use of social media by politicians, journalists and citizens over this time.

We begin this outline of our findings by providing an overview of some general observations about these changes over time. We then describe in more detail what our content analysis revealed about how the use of social media in relation to traditional media is reported on in the sampled articles. We analyse how different user groups (politicians, citizens and journalists) are portrayed to employ social media as political tools, what their attitudes towards these tools are, and how content from politicians' social media activities is being cited in traditional news media. Finally, we outline how the use of social media in relation to traditional media outlets is conceptualised in our sample of articles.

Amount of Reporting

A first – obvious, yet noteworthy – finding of our analysis is the overall increase in reporting on the use of social media in Australian politics. Our searches found over three times more articles about social media as political tools for 2010 than 2008, and five times more for 2012 than 2008. Clearly, social media are now more widely used in politics and more frequently discussed in newspapers. Our qualitative analysis revealed that in 2008, articles spoke more about YouTube, Facebook, and blogs and other websites than Twitter. For example, an article from the AAP Australian National News Wire from 1 February 2008 reported that 'a significant number of politicians didn't use the internet during last year's federal election campaign', going on to note that in 2007,

> only two out of three sitting federal members and senators had a personal website leading into the election campaign and only one in 10 had a MySpace page. ... Only 6.6 per cent had a blog, 5.75 per cent had posted one or more videos on YouTube, 3.5 per cent had a Facebook site and only 3.1 per cent had a podcast, as at 20 November 2007. (Osborne, 2008)

What coverage in 2008 still highlighted, in other words, were lags in the overall adoption of online technologies by political actors. By contrast, articles from 2012 focussed much more specifically on Twitter adoption, taking general Internet use as a given. Furthermore, earlier articles defined and explained what social media are, and how they are used. For instance, one article about Julia Gillard joining Twitter from 2010 explains that

> Twitter allows anyone to sign up send out messages of 140 characters or less whenever they like; others sign up and follow the messages. (Alexander, 2010)

By 2012, articles about Twitter, Facebook and YouTube no longer describe what they are, seemingly expecting their readers to know these different social media tools and how they are used. This is clearly indicative of the increasing integration and normalisation of social media tools into everyday life.

2010 – The Twitter Election?

The 2010 federal election has commonly been referred to as the first 'Twitter election' in Australia, due to the prominent role played by social media. However, Bruns and Burgess (2011) have pointed out that it was not so much the use by politicians of social media in their campaigning that was significant, but more the increase in engagement with political themes and discussions by the Australian public and by journalists that was noteworthy during this campaign. In our analysis of news reporting on the use of social media as political tools, we charted the number of articles that reported on how politicians use social media against those which discussed how members of the public employ them for political engagement (fig. 2). Since each year yielded a different total number of relevant articles, the results are displayed as a percentage of the total count of articles in each year, in order to provide a more representative visualisation.

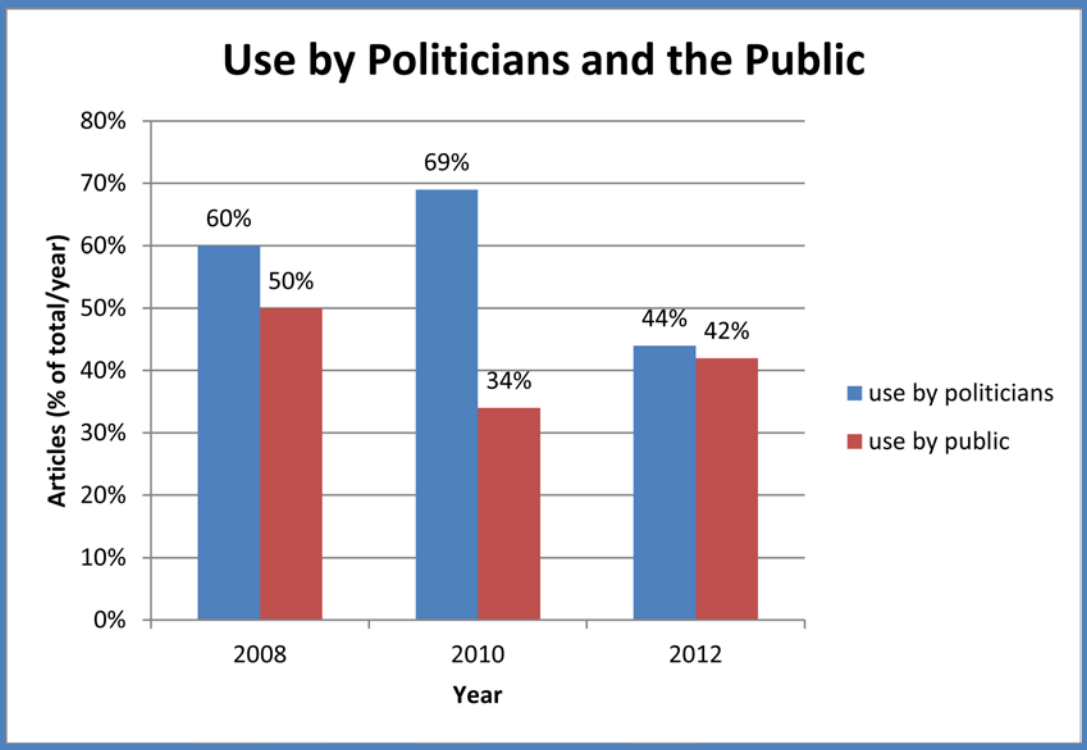

Figure 2: Percentage of sampled articles per year that report on the use of social media as political tools by politicians and the public (double count possible)

Our analysis suggests that the media report slightly more on how politicians use social media than on how the general public engage with these political tools. This was especially pronounced in the federal election year 2010. At first glance, this does not appear to correlate with the assertion by Bruns and Burgess that discussions about social media in the 2010 election were centred around uses of social media by the general public than by politicians; however, closer content analysis reveals that a large amount of articles, particularly from earlier years, which thematise politicians' uses of social media do so explicitly by arguing that politicians were not using these tools effectively and in the way that the public expected them to (see detailed analysis of user groups below).

User Groups

The three main user groups that appeared in our sample of articles were politicians, the public/citizens and the media/journalists. Social media were conceptualised differently in relation to these user groups. For example, an article may have portrayed how politicians use social media as tools to campaign and engage with voters. Alternatively (or sometimes additionally), an article may have portrayed how members of the general public use social media to engage with or talk about politics, politicians, and policies. Finally, in relation to the third user group – the media/journalists – there were nuances between articles that portrayed how social media are employed as tools for political news reporting and those that described how politicians and/or members of the general public use social media as political tools. Some articles discussed how the use of social media by one group is conceptualised and evaluated by another group, for example how members of the public feel about the way in which Australian politicians employ social media to engage with them. Some articles discussed multiple user groups, aspects of their use, and the relations between them. Therefore, there were often several dimensions to, and interconnections between, the way in which the articles in our sample portrayed the use of social media as political tools in relation to different user groups.

The most reported-on group of users were politicians, followed by the general public and – as a distant third – the media. Fig. 3 shows the percentage of articles in each year that referred to the use of social media as political tools by these different groups.

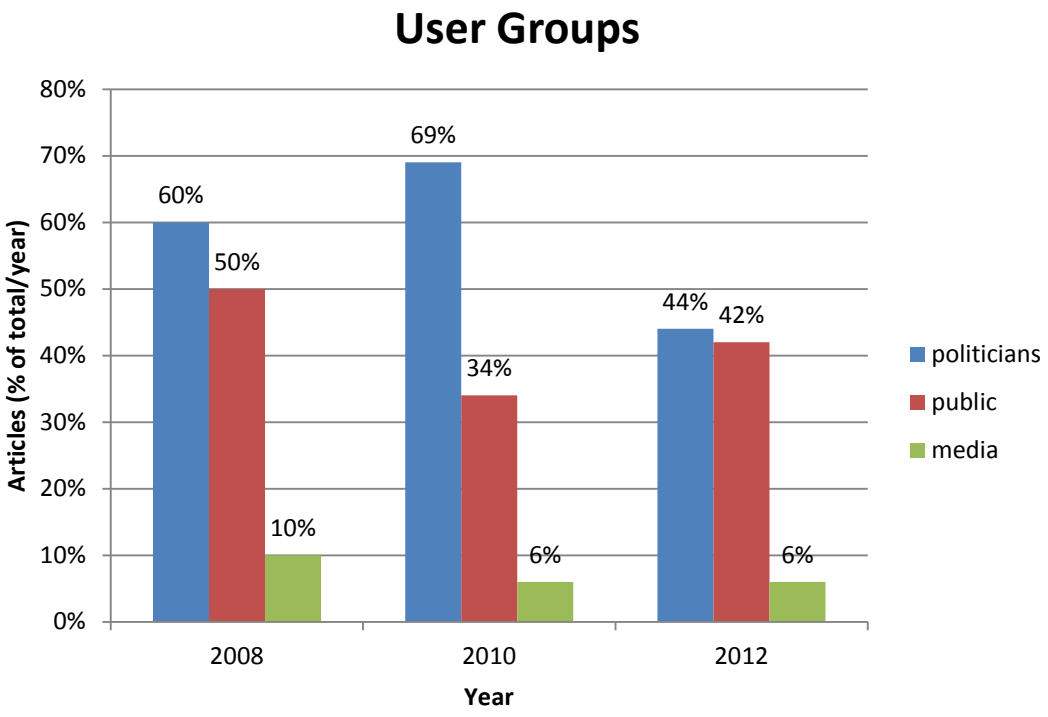

Figure 3: Percentage of sampled articles per year that refer to the different user groups (double count possible)

Evidently, the traditional media discuss quite extensively how other user groups (particularly politicians and the public) employ social media as political tools – but reflection on the media's own uses of social media is largely absent. Our content analysis also revealed further details about the different ways in which each user group employed these tools. These are discussed below.

Politicians

Table 10 lists the different reasons why politicians employ social media as political tools, as they were portrayed in our sample articles. It also indicates how many articles mentioned a particular application in each year.

Politicians: Reasons for social media use	Mentions		
	2008	2010	2012
cut out traditional media as mediators between public and politicians	-	-	2
gather support	1	2	4
push policies	1	1	3
create a personable image	1	4	3
organise campaign	1	-	-
attack opponents	-	2	7
create personal connections with voters	1	1	4
provide real-time information (immediacy)	1	5	6
show politicians understand society	2	1	-
interact/online debate	2	1	7
cost-effective communication tool	-	1	-
get voters to share/campaign with their own networks: spread	-	1	-
reach particular voter groups	1	3	3
surveillance of citizens by government	1	-	2

Table 10: Politicians' reasons for and ways of using social media

Especially notable here, perhaps, is the shift towards a real-time focus, interaction and online debate in 2010 and 2012, which may be attributed particularly to the greater utilisation of Twitter as a public real-time social media platform. The substantial growth in articles which report on the use of social media to build politicians' own public images and attack those of their opponents, on the other hand, may be related to wider shifts in the Australian political climate following the close outcome of the 2010 election.

There is a further notable change in how politicians' use of social media was reported across the years. In 2008, six articles discussed how politicians use social media; of these, four (that is, 67 per cent) suggested that politicians were using these tools incorrectly. In 2010, only 35 per cent of the articles that mentioned politicians' use of social media suggested that they were using them incorrectly; by 2012, this had dropped to 10 per cent. Fig. 4 visualises this significant drop in reporting on politicians using social media incorrectly or ineffectively.

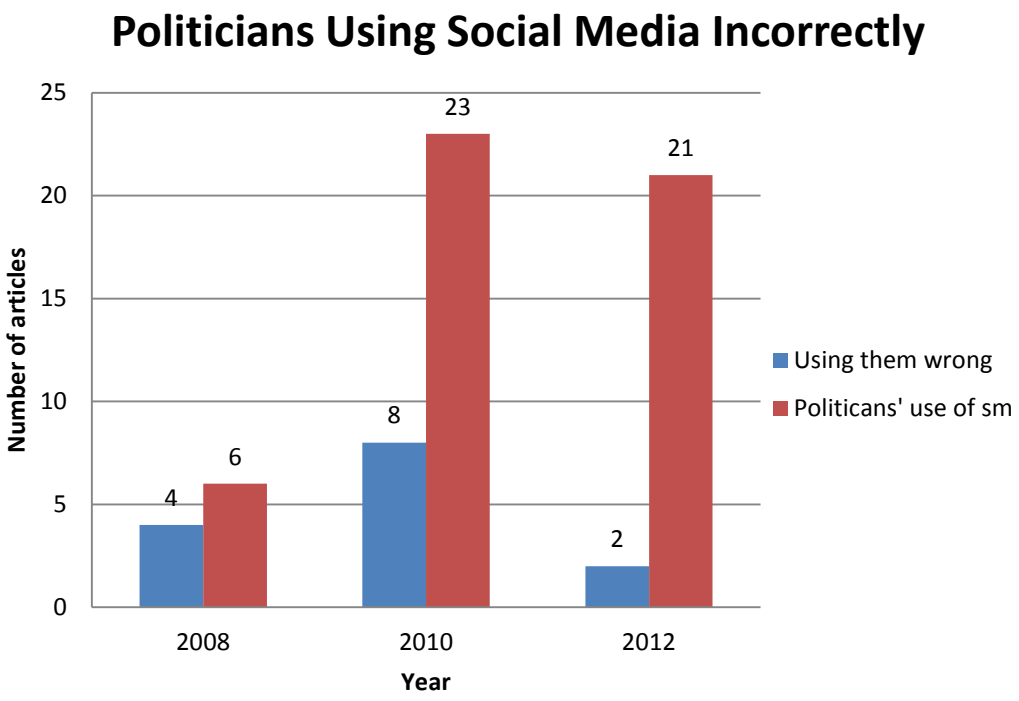

Figure 4: Distribution of sampled articles reporting on politicians using social media incorrectly, compared to total number of articles reporting on politicians' use of social media

In 2010, the election year, a relatively large proportion of articles still suggested that politicians were not employing social media in the most effective ways. For example, an article in *The Australian* from August 2010 cites an academic who suggests that 'they [politicians] know it [Twitter] exists, they know they should be there, but they don't know how to use it effectively' (Jackson, 2010). The fact that 35 per cent of the articles that year which reported on how politicians used social media suggest that they are not employing them in the most effective ways supports the assertion by Burgess and Bruns (2012) that the 2010 election was characterised less by the successful adoption by politicians of social media as tools to engage their voters than by the way in which everyday citizens took up social media to become politically involved.

Overall, however, the percentage of reports of politicians using social media incorrectly decreased over the years. This indicates that over time, politicians appear to have become better at using these tools, and that there now is less anxiety about how to use them properly. Social media seemingly are becoming more integrated into everyday life and into the professional practices of politicians. It will be interesting to see how politicians employ social media in their 2013 federal election campaigns, and how mainstream media report such uses.

In 2008, two articles out of a total of six that explored the reasons why politicians use social media suggested that it was to show that they understand society or are moving with the times. For example, in one article Professor Jim

Macnamara from the University of Technology Sydney is cited as claiming that 'the Labor Party presented a fresh image that they were with it and certainly embracing new media' (in Osborne, 2008). An article in *The Sunday Age* paraphrases Liberal Party spokesman Christopher Pyne as stating that the party '"must invest" in the internet to become a modern political party' (Gordon, 2008). By contrast, in 2010 only one of a total of 35 articles reported on this theme, and none did in 2012. The fact that using social media to demonstrate an understanding of technological advances diminished as a reasoning behind politicians' use of these tools suggests that while social media were still considered a novelty in 2008, and one which politicians could employ to appear innovative and modern, by 2010 and 2012 their use had become more normalised and even expected; politicians' use of social media as such is no longer a newsworthy occurrence.

On the other hand, a theme that became more prominent from 2008 to 2012 was the use of social media by politicians and the government to cut out traditional media as mediators between them and the public. In 2008 and 2010, no articles in our sample referred to this theme. Hence, our analysis reveals not only how social media use is reported on in traditional media, but also indicates more general shifts and trends in their application as political tools over time.

Some of the articles about politicians' uses of new media also captured their attitudes to social media. A few articles each year (see Fig. 5 below) provided indications of whether politicians viewed new media tools as useful means of political engagement or as useless or even detrimental. With the exception of one article from 2008, which argued that journalists see social media as a threat (Bolt, 2008), articles on other user groups did not encapsulate the attitudes of journalist or citizen social media users to these tools.

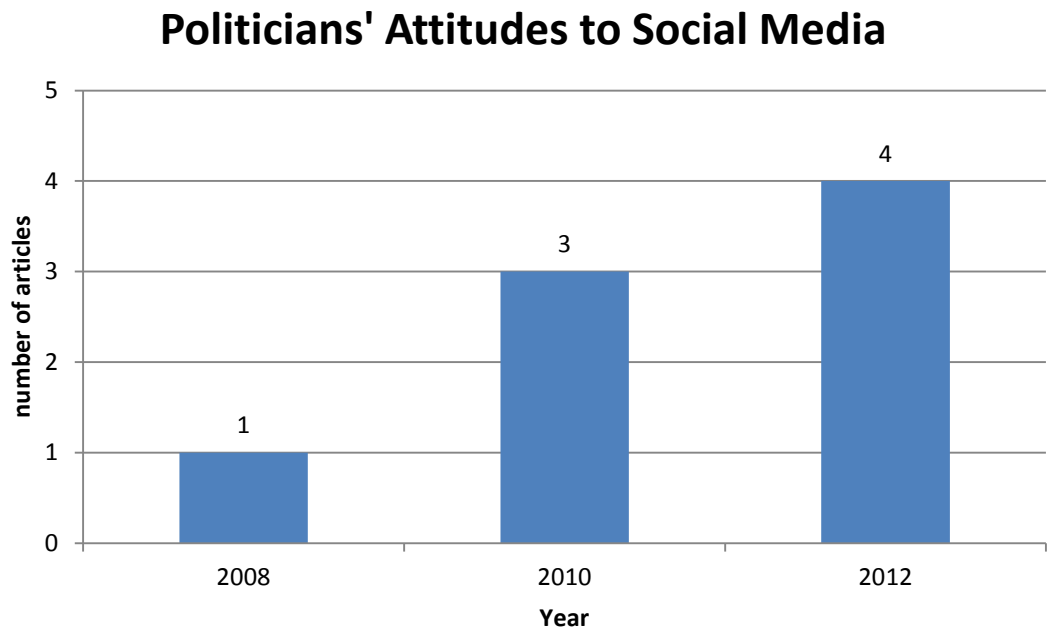

Figure 5: Number of articles per year reporting on politicians' attitudes to social media

While there are only a few articles in each of our samples that discuss this issue, their content again reveals a story of succession from negative to more positive attitudes towards new media as political tools. The article from 2008 indicates that politicians have only grudgingly accepted online sites to engage with voters and support their campaigning efforts, but suggests that this attitude is changing (Gordon, 2008). An article from 2010 reports on Julie Bishop questioning whether new media may be 'dumbing down politics' or 'making it more accessible to people who would otherwise not be interested' (AAP, 2010) and another portrays Minister Faulkner as fascinated by Twitter and keen to learn about it but admitting that it certainly is not 'his medium' (Bourke, 2010). Both of these articles demonstrate a development in politicians' attitudes to social media from caution and hesitation to a more curious exploration of the tools.

Articles from 2012 indicate a more integrated use of new media sites into politics and a more confident attitude by users. One article cites Malcolm Turnbull, Shadow Minister for Communication and Broadband, who states that through social media, politicians 'have megaphones of our own and a capacity to respond and make our own case directly that previous generations of politicians didn't have' (Peake, 2012). Another discusses a tweet-war between the Victorian State Government and the Opposition that had politicians on each side accusing one another of setting up fake Twitter accounts. The article cites Minister Matthew Guy as claiming that this is 'an unacceptable use of social media' (Wright, 2012), indicating his views about appropriate uses of social media by politicians. Another article cites South Australian MP Rowan Ramsey stating that while he is 'ambivalent' about Twitter he could see the appeal of being better connected with younger voters (Butt, 2012). The way in which politicians talk about the use of social media in these articles suggests that the attitudes of politicians towards social media have changed over the years.

It would be interesting to explore this trend further in a larger dataset in order to provide more representative insights into how the attitudes of politicians to social media have changed over the years. Looking at more articles from each year may also generate insights into how the public's and journalists' attitudes to social media are represented in the traditional media, a theme on which we were not able to collect representative data from our current sample.

The Public

In relation to the general public's use of social media for political purposes, some articles sought to outline more specifically who actually uses these tools. For example, one article in *The Canberra Times* highlights how social activists use new media as political tools (*Canberra Times*, 2012). Another discusses the innovative use of social media by a school teacher to teach his Year 8 students about Australian politics (Topsfield, 2010). An article from 2010 refers specifically to Twitter to suggest that its 'primary user base is educated, urban professionals aged between 25 and 34' who are already 'politically engaged' (Maley, 2010).

Table 11 illustrates the different reasons why members of the public are described to use social media in our sample of articles and how many articles mentioned each theme per year.

Citizens: Reason for social media use	Mentions		
	2008	2010	2012
support politicians	-	-	8
criticise politicians	2	3	3
gossip about private lives of politicians	-	1	2
citizen campaigning	2	3	8

Table 11: Citizens' reasons for using social media for political purposes

In 2008 and 2010, we recorded no articles that indicated the use of social media by citizens to support politicians. By contrast, of the eight articles that discussed supportive social media users in 2012, six refer to the same story: radio broadcaster Alan Jones's comments that Julia Gillard's father had died of shame because of his daughter's 'lies'. The articles discuss a rush of support from social media users for Gillard, and condemnation of Jones's remarks. Interestingly, the other two articles in this category also highlight the support of citizens for Prime Minister Gillard with reference to a different scandal: cattle company chief executive David Farley referring to her as an 'old cow'. The emergence of such uses of social media may reflect a broader change in Australian political discourse (towards more emotive and inflammatory language, and strong public responses to it); it remains to be seen whether this remains an isolated episode, or whether it indicates a lasting shift in the reported political uses of social media.

Members of the public are predominantly portrayed as using social media as tools to campaign, fight for their rights, and support particular political causes. This indicates that citizens employ social media as tools for demanding and effecting change and improvement in the public policy issues that affect them. For example, one article sourced from the AAP Australian National Newswire (2012a) describes how protesters employed Facebook to organise rallies against animal cruelty and the live export trade, after the media reported on the inhumane slaughter of Australian sheep in Pakistan. Similarly, Tomazin (2010) describes how Victorian university students used Facebook and a website to campaign for the Greens in the state election. The overarching sentiment seems to be that social media provide tools for citizens to speak out against public policy issues that affect them negatively, and to rally for change. In addition to issues-based initiatives, these may also be centred around specific politicians and parties, as seen recently especially in social media-driven initiatives to support or attack Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

Journalists

Discussion on how journalists use new media as tools for political reporting was much less frequent than articles on the other two identified user groups (see Fig. 3 above). But the few articles that did engage with this theme indicate a change in uses and attitudes over the years. The single article recorded in 2008 laments the slow uptake by politicians and journalists of blogging, and suggests that this

evidences 'a gap caused by the media's refusal – on the grounds of fashion or faith – to cover both sides of issues that actually have people hopping' (Bolt, 2008). Once again, the potential for social media to be used as political tools (by politicians and journalists) is highlighted, yet the early article indicates that this potential is not being realised. By 2010, articles reveal that journalists have begun to use social media tools, however still not in the most effective ways. Maley suggests that 'Twitter in particular tends to be a closed circle, in which politicians tweet to a captive audience of journalists, and journalists post links to the reports or stories they've written' (2010).

Articles from 2012 convey more successful engagement by journalists with social media tools. Buchanan and Ellis (2012) report on a squabble between a politician and journalists that played out on Twitter. They portray Twitter as a new playing-field for the media to critique politicians and their policies, which in turn allows politicians to respond directly and personally to journalists. An article by the AAP (2012b) announces the release of a new website it will administer, streaming live news from Parliament and reporting statements made and conversations held by politicians via social media tools. Such growing engagement with online tools, both as a means of and source for reporting political news, indicates that new media are increasingly being integrated into political news reporting.

Although the sample of articles that reported on the use of new media by journalists for political reporting was comparatively small, the way in which these articles discussed the topic indicates a gradual shift from no engagement at all to a more innovative and competent application of these tools to support professional journalistic practice.

In order to determine the extent to which journalists use social media as a source for, or as supporting evidence in, their reporting, we also recorded how many articles from each year provided direct citations of politicians' social media statements and conversation. Interestingly, we found an almost even distribution of articles that cited politicians across the three years (see Fig. 6 below). This attests to the fact that politicians were the most widely reported-on user group in each of the years we examined. The spike in articles citing politicians' new media postings in 2010 is most likely attestable to the federal election held that year.

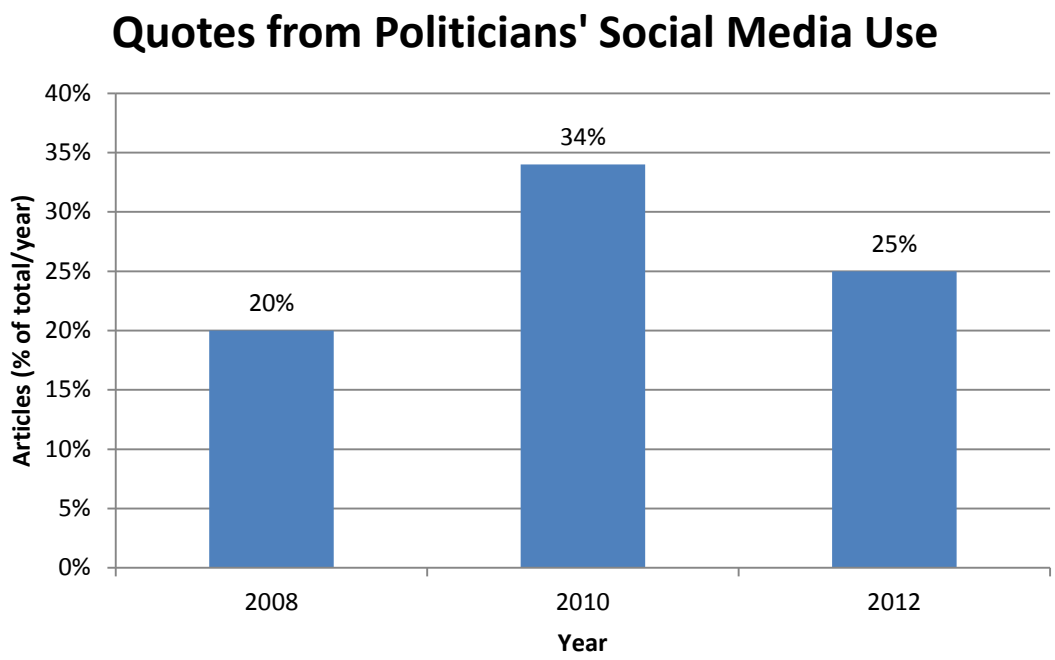

Figure 6: Percentage of total articles per year citing politicians' social media posts

Social Media in Relation to Traditional Media

The aim of this study has been to explore how social media are portrayed in the traditional media as political tools, as well as to identify the relation between social media and mainstream media in political news reporting. This, then, provides a basis for conceptualising inter-media agenda-setting processes in Australian politics.

We thus used our content analysis of articles sampled from 2008, 2010 and 2012 to record how the articles portrayed social media. We noted whether articles compared traditional and social media, and whether they evaluated the relationship between the two media forms. We documented whether articles considered new and traditional media as interrelated in their use as political tools, or whether they portrayed social media simply as an additional tool (not a replacement), as a more useful tool, or as a less useful tool than conventional media. Table 12 shows the categories we used to classify the articles.

Themes ***Subgroup: Comparison between social media and traditional media***
Comparisons between social media and traditional media
→ interrelation
→ social media = additional medium, not replacement
→ have to use social media appropriately to reap benefits
→ social media = more useful tool
→ traditional media = more useful/more widely used tool

Table 12: Categories used to analyse comparison between social media and traditional media in sampled articles

Our data reveal a significant decrease in articles that compared social media to traditional media from 2008 to 2012. In 2008, 40 per cent of articles (4/10) conceptualised the relationship between social media and traditional media. In 2010, only 9 per cent (3/35) of analysed articles discussed this theme, and in 2012, 13 per cent did (6/48). This decline is shown in Fig. 7 below.

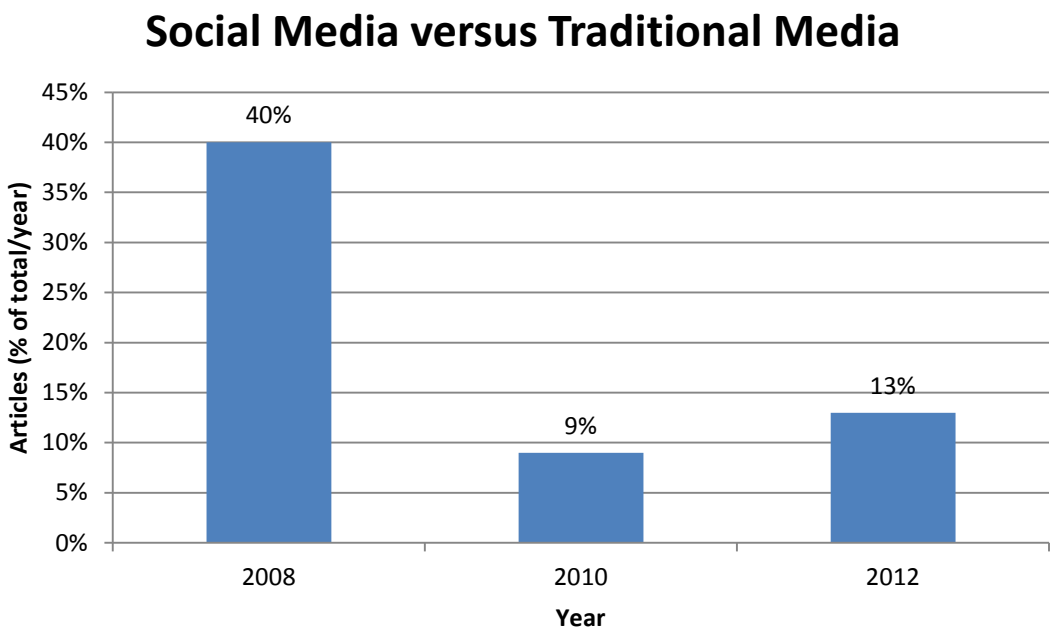

Figure 7: Percentage of articles comparing social media and traditional media

A more detailed analysis of how these articles conceptualised the relation between new and traditional media reveals that in 2008 there was more overall deliberation about whether these new tools are going to replace traditional media or provide additional avenues for political engagement and reporting. By 2012, articles referred more generally to the interrelation between social media and traditional media without establishing whether they compete or complement one another.

Out of the six articles in our sample that discussed social and traditional media in 2012, three suggested that they were interrelated, one indicated that they were useful only if used appropriately, and three defined them as an additional medium, not a replacement. In 2008, two articles suggested that they were interrelated, three saw them as an additional medium, one suggested that social media (at the time, blogs) were more useful as an avenue of political engagement than traditional media, and one indicated that they were only useful if employed appropriately. Some articles addressed several themes (e.g. that social media and traditional media are interrelated *and* that social media provide a useful additional medium). Such articles were counted in all the categories they represented.

One 2008 article cites an academic who suggests that 'we're likely to see more intermediation, where media work together and swap and share information' (Macnamara, cited in Osborne, 2008). The article provides an example of this

interrelation by referring to the collaboration between the Ten Network and online social networking site MySpace in the 2007 federal election, which enabled citizens to upload video questions via the social networking site which were shown to politicians during *Meet the Press*. The article makes predictions about how social media may become more integrated into politics in the future. By 2012 articles reported more definitively on the present use of social media as political tools. For example, Northover highlights the ABC television show *Q&A* as a prime example of 'the phenomenon of "multi-screen" audiences: people watching TV while watching their smartphone or laptop and interacting with others in real time'.

Overall, then, while there is not so much of a shift in *how* social media are conceptualised in relation to traditional media from 2008 to 2012 (mostly as a useful additional medium), there is a growing sense that these tools have become deeply integrated into political reporting and engagement, and a decrease in the overall journalistic discussion of this topic. The fact that fewer articles compare social and traditional media in 2012 than in 2008 indicates that social media as additional media for political engagement have become significantly more normalised.

Conclusion

Our close content analysis of a sample of nearly 100 newspaper articles from 2008, 2010 and 2012 about the use of social media as political tools has provided a multi-faceted insight into the diverse dimensions of how social media are portrayed as political tools in Australian newspapers. The longitudinal approach of this study makes it possible to compare and contrast how attitudes to, and uses of, social media in Australian politics and media reporting have changed and developed. An in-depth portrayal of some of the most prominent themes reveals substantial differences in the tenor of mainstream media reports on social media over the years. In 2008, social media were often still portrayed as a threat to traditional media; by 2012 they had become more accepted as an interrelated or supplementary tool.

Similarly, the articles analysed in this sample reported on the ways in which different user groups employed these tools for their specific purposes, and showed their attitudes towards these tools growing more confident and competent over the years. We noted that journalists writing about politicians' uses of social media cited content from politicians' social media postings at a steady rate from 2008 to 2012. All of our findings indicate that social media are becoming more integrated into the daily lives of all stakeholders, and more used as political tools by politicians, citizens and journalists alike. The interrelation between social media and traditional media is shaping new ways for political actors to engage with one another in the modern political public sphere.

While our sample provided a number of interesting examples from which we are able to draw some telling conclusions, it should be noted that it remains limited; the analysis presented here draws on a sample of all articles published during each of the three years, and does not represent the totality of all mainstream media coverage of social media uses in politics. In follow-up research, we seek to develop our methodology and analysis further. We intend to conduct a similar comparative study involving in-depth quantitative and qualitative analysis of articles from 2010 and 2013, the two years in which the two most recent Australian federal elections will have been held. We will endeavour to compare all articles about social media from each year by employing computer-supported content analysis processes, in order to be able to examine a larger sample of articles and generate more representative results for each year. Such results may then also be compared with data from other countries involved in this and future research projects.

While there is still room for the further development of our methodology, this initial longitudinal quantitative analysis provides significant insights into why, how and for what purposes social media tools are employed in the Australian political landscape, and how traditional media outlets report on this new phenomenon. It shows a political media ecology in considerable flux, and points to significant changes to the professional practices of politicians, journalists, and other stakeholders in the political process in Australia.

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Please see http://socialmedia.qut.edu.au/ for more details about social media research at Queensland University of Technology.